

## The Imaginary South of Country-Western Music

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The country in “country music” is America.  
—President Jimmy Carter  
October 1979<sup>1</sup>

Country-western music in the United States has traditionally conjured images of working-class life and love—very *real* places for the people who live that life. A hard life produces a deep need for escape, and evidence of this need can be found in country music, where the imaginary places created in the lyrics are particularly important. The general stereotype of country music lyrics is that most of its songs practically wave the Confederate battle flag—this is certainly what I had expected to find in my research into the genre, especially in light of songs as traditional as “Dixie” to Charlie Daniels’ “The South’s Gonna Do It Again.” I expected to frequently find lyrics giving voice to the white Southern working-class wish for

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<sup>1</sup> President Jimmy Carter, as quoted by Chet Hagan in *Country Music Legends in the Hall of Fame* (1982). This book, while dated, is helpful for those new to country music’s origins and legends. Hagan’s book was published by the Country Music Foundation Press, a division of Thomas Nelson Publishers of Nashville. Adding a twist that is strange to the country-music outsider, or to those unfamiliar with country music’s deep roots in Evangelical Christianity, Thomas Nelson is well-known for publishing Christian (most specifically Baptist) works.

“the South [to] rise again.” However, I was surprised to find that regional separatism, while one of the hallmarks of much country music, is not easily pegged as such, even in light of country music’s hoisting the often jingoistic banner of American patriotism. Just the same, ultra-patriotic undertones in the lyrics of country music are more than a little strange for a genre that has so long associated itself with the American *South*.

The mere idea of “the imaginary South of country music” calls up even more questions of reality before we even begin to explore the realm of fantasy: what is country music? Can we say that country music’s “country” is the American country, as Jimmy Carter said, or does it simply speak for the region below the Mason-Dixon line? The best answers I have found at this stage in my research have been in the songs themselves and in the surprising amount of scholarship on country music lyrics.

## Why Country Music?

My interest in country music springs from my attempts to understand my own rural, Southern, “poor white trash” background. Growing up, I listened only to Top 40 popular music, eschewing the idea that country music was a real and respectable genre. For a young person trying to escape her own family’s hardscrabble farming background and make it out of Franklin, Georgia, and away to the promise of a college education, country music was only a symptom of the afflictions that I wished to escape: no-good cheatin’ men, desperate poverty, prison time, and alcohol abuse. But in attempting to understand the people I know and love in my hometown, I realized many years later that country music provided great insight into why my

friends lived, loved, and worked the way they did. How could so many of my working-class friends “raise hell” every Friday and Saturday night at the local honky-tonk bar, yet be in church first thing every Sunday morning? How could they simultaneously embrace the raucous lives of “good old boys” and those of devout, pious Evangelical Christians? These questions, and many more like them, continued to haunt me. I realized after a time that it was not simply moral or religious hypocrisy that enabled my friends and loved ones to travel two seemingly disparate paths at the same time. It was the strangely yet deeply-intertwined nature of working-class existence and the Southern country church experience.<sup>2</sup> “The coexistence of hedonism and religiosity in Southern culture” is not a problem for the vast majority of the people I know and love—as a matter of fact, it is the way working-class people survive in a narrowly-defined sphere of existence.<sup>3</sup>

The imaginary South of which I speak is rooted in country music simply because so many of the people who originated, wrote, perform, and consume country music have roots in the South. The vast majority of country music performers are white Southerners, and there is not much ethnic variation among these performers. If one takes a look at the artists who have charted songs on Billboard’s Top 100 country charts in the last fifty years, one finds very few exceptions to the white Anglo-Saxon standards—Charlie Pride’s albums, Ray Charles’ extraordinary country album, Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown’s recordings with country banjo legend Roy Clark, pop-country crossover Rita

Coolidge (an American of Cherokee descent), and Freddy Fender (of Mexican descent) immediately come to mind.<sup>4</sup> Not only are the majority of country music performers white, but they are also primarily American, with the notable exceptions of Shania Twain (a Canadian of Ojibway descent), pop-country crossover k.d. lang (a white Canadian), and Keith Urban (a white Australian).

What is more, country music “retains an identification with the working-class South, and it still largely reflects the values and assumptions of its performers and audience.”<sup>5</sup> What happens in country music’s imaginary South is more often than not based on “what passes for real life in the South.”<sup>6</sup> The lyrics of country music construct a dream-world, a place for working people to express themselves as they see it—and, not least of all, a world that reflects the South as songwriters/singers *wish* to see it.

### So, what is the “imaginary South” of country music?

I maintain that it is one that is created by and for white people in the lyrics of country music. Since such a great number of country musicians and songwriters have roots in the South, I would like to introduce the concept of the imaginary South of country music by quickly exploring country music’s roots as a genre—in fact, by attempting to define what makes up country music. A very brief history of the roots of country music is essential here.

<sup>2</sup> Tex Sample, *White Soul: Country Music, the Church, and Working Americans* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 36, 140-141.

<sup>3</sup> David Sanjek in *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Merritt Moseley, University of North Carolina at Asheville, for reminding me of Freddy Fender’s Hispanic heritage.

<sup>5</sup> John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim*, p. 85.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Country music comes from what was once termed “hillbilly music”—music that originated in the hills of Appalachia. Some scholars have identified the birthplace of country music as a “Fertile Crescent” and “a Southern-based hearth of culture” where the images and figures that populate country songs were frequent and familiar to both listener and singer alike.<sup>7</sup> Many historians target 1927 as country music’s birth year, when Ralph Peer of Victor Records set out on a long trip through the South to find and record new, traditional “hillbilly music” acts for his label.<sup>8</sup> This trip was most productive during Peer’s stop in Bristol, Tennessee, where both Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family—giants of early country music—happened to show up at Peer’s makeshift recording studio to record some of their earliest songs that would make them “commercial country music’s first star acts.”<sup>9</sup> Also integral to early country music was the influence of the blues and other traditional African-American musical forms; we can hear these influences in much of country music, and some of the first country musicians to implement the blues in their music were Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams.<sup>10</sup>

So just what is it that happens in the imaginary South of country-western music? I plan to examine two

interrelated areas: 1) work and social class, and 2) sociopolitical views in country music lyrics.

### Work, Social Class, and Economic Concerns

Since one of country music’s larger themes is work—and blue-collar work at that—we must examine work- and class-related concerns in the imaginary South of country music. Country is written and performed primarily by white people for consumption by white people, many of whom are of a Southern working-class background. Throughout much of country music, a thread of self-reliance, pride in one’s work, and high self-esteem runs through songs about the “workin’ man” and his daily struggles. Country singers and their main fan base either are or have been working people, who are “locked too often in dead-end jobs that offer neither fulfillment nor security, and [who live] in an American society that values neither working people nor work unless [it is] glamorous or status-related.”<sup>11</sup> It is out of this intense frustration that country music’s most haunting lyrics spring. Working people dream of telling the world and supervisors of their rage at being treated unfairly and as if they are expendable, but often it is only in their music that they can truly say what is on their minds—if they dare speak it aloud, these people run the risk of losing their jobs (meaning more suffering for the family) or, in the cases of the “protest singers” of the 1920s and 1930s, severe beatings or death at the hands of company thugs. Speaking their minds in song allows these

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew K. Smith and James E. Akenson, “The Civil War in Country Music Tradition” in *Country Music Goes to War*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Louisville: U of Kentucky P, 2005), 5.

<sup>8</sup> David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, page 10.

<sup>10</sup> John Shelton Reed, *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 84.

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<sup>11</sup> Bill C. Malone, *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and Roots of Country Music* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 114.

people to ease some of the emotional burdens they face. It also allows them to express opinions in a forum where they will not be abused or reprised for what they have to say.

Songs from the 1930s, often written and sung by female artists, deftly portray the plight of the white working poor in rural Appalachia. Songs such as Aunt Molly Jackson's "Poor Miner's Farewell," "Hungry Disgusted Blues," and "Kentucky Miner's Wife (Ragged Hungry Blues)" openly detail the lives of the poor who worked in the coal mines for as little as thirty-three cents' pay per ton of coal loaded.<sup>12</sup> Jackson's half-sister, Sarah Ogan Gunning, was also a widely-known protest singer and labor union organizer, and one of her songs, "Babe O' Mine," was popularized by Woody Guthrie in 1941:

Yes, we've got to win this race, put the bosses in their place,  
And we gotta get organized, babe o' mine....  
It's that good old C.I.O., 'cause it's everywhere you go  
So we'll just keep on organizin', babe o' mine.<sup>13</sup>

For a genre of music that many people assume is highly conservative, these lyrics are a surprising tribute to organized labor, which the 21<sup>st</sup>-century South often vilifies. In addition to the championing of common, working-class people and their cause, we see here a strong progressive and populist bent influenced by the budding American labor movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>12</sup> Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown, 1993), 114.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Ogun Gunning; performed by Woody Guthrie, 1941. Fair use. "This was Guthrie's "first commercial recording after the RCA Victor 'Dust Bowl Ballads' album" (Ronald D. Cohen and Dave Samuelson, liner notes for "Songs for Political Action," Bear Family Records. BCD 15720 JL, 1996, p. 79.)

It is strange that many listeners, both casual and experienced, no longer take into account the early "hillbilly" recordings of Guthrie, Molly Jackson, and Gunning when considering country music's history. It is important to place this music at the heart of country's concern for and elevation of working-class people. If we consider the imaginary South through the eyes of early "hillbilly" singers, we can surmise that it is a place where the working poor are downtrodden and abused, but where they also can speak freely about their struggles against poverty and cruel businessmen. This is certainly in contrast to the South of reality, where politicians and businessmen *claim* to stand for working people but simultaneously undermine working people's livelihoods through laws such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and where trade unions of all kinds are cast in an unfavorable light.

The championing of working people as worthy in their own right is a thread we see running throughout country music. Quite a few noteworthy songs from the 1960s to the present day exemplify this point of view, and give the working man (though not necessarily the working *woman*) a voice in a rapidly-changing world. Merle Haggard's "Workin' Man Blues" (1966) demonstrates this particularly well. Haggard's persona speaks of how "it's hard to make a livin' with a wife and nine kids" on a blue-collar man's pay, but says a few lines later, "Ain't never been on welfare / That's a place I'll never be."<sup>14</sup> Why this swipe at government assistance in the same song that praises working-class values and pride? For the answer, we can also look to Aaron Tippin's "Workin' Man's Ph.D.," from 1994:

<sup>14</sup> Merle Haggard, "Workin' Man Blues."

You get up every morning 'fore the sun comes up  
 Toss a lunchbox in a pickup truck  
 A long hard day sure ain't much fun  
 But you've gotta get it started if you wanna get it done  
 You set your mind and roll up your sleeves  
 You're workin' on a workin' man's Ph.D...."<sup>15</sup>

Tippin sings of the tedium of a blue-collar job, and admits that it "ain't much fun." However, we see in action here the Protestant work ethic: work is not much fun, and it does not matter whether it is fun. What matters is that people do their jobs well and complete their tasks. Tippin cheers on working-class people even more when he adds that "there ain't no shame in a job well done" and that the blue-collar working man will "face [himself] at the end of the day / And be damn proud of whatever [he] made."<sup>16</sup> Both the product completed and the wages earned at the end of the day are a great source of pride for the working-class man. However, this song veers away from a tribute to pride in blue-collar work and gets in a punch or two at those whom the Southern working-class man both admires and reviles:

As a matter of fact, I'd like to set things straight  
 A few more people should be pullin' their weight  
 If you want a cram course in reality  
 You get yourself a workin' man's Ph.D...."<sup>17</sup>

In "set[ting] things straight," we know the persona thinks that something is amiss—someone or some group is looking down on the working class. But who is it? "A few more people" is vague; we are left to make up our own minds as to who these people might be. If Tippin is firing this shot at so-called "ivory-tower intellectuals," then the title makes

perfect, simple sense. The long-standing antagonism between blue collar and white collar makes for great country music material. What better way to make one's people look better than to make one's "betters" look bad or foolish? However, we cannot ignore the possibility that those "who should be pullin' their weight" (and those to whom Haggard refers) could also mean those who are on welfare. This is another sore point with many white Southern working people, who tend to ignore the documented fact that the average American welfare recipient is a white working-class or poor woman in her early 30s with an average of three children to support on her own, and that this so-called "welfare mama" usually receives assistance for an average of three years—long enough to get back on her feet.<sup>18</sup> To launch a shot toward those receiving government assistance is to conduct class warfare, and even race warfare. In this aspect of country's imaginary South, we see that the post-Civil War attempts of the wealthy to divide poor black and white people and turn them against one another worked—to this day, many white working-class Southerners still hold as complete truth the stereotype of the black welfare mother.<sup>19</sup> So, in this instance, the imaginary South of country music is also one where socioeconomic realities have yet to take hold in the minds of common people. It is much easier to believe in stereotypes and outright lies in order to build oneself up. It is also important to note what country music does not say about other race- and class-related Southern realities. To date, I have heard no mention in Top 40 country music of illegal

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Tippin and Donny Kees, "Workin' Man's Ph.D."

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Nick Torok and Florence Wakoko, both of Columbus State University, for assistance with this information.

<sup>19</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, Chapters 2-4.

immigration or methamphetamine labs. Both of these are of growing concern in towns across the South, but so far have not appeared on the country radar. Perhaps if country music makes no mention of these elephants seated in the middle of its living room floor, they will simply disappear. In this way, we can see that country's imaginary South is also one where reality is ignored. It is easier to believe what one wishes were true than to confront realities.

One of the prevailing assumptions about country music is that all of its songs espouse highly conservative political, religious, and social views. However, in his study of country music's political content, Robert Van Sickle contends that the most successful and popular country songs lack political content; as a matter of fact, they are largely apolitical.<sup>20</sup> Van Sickle's well-researched study examines each Number One song from the Billboard charts for each week from 1960 to 2000 (a total of 1,217 songs), and finds that only 73 of these songs—a measly six percent—"contain significant observations of a political or ideological nature," thus turning the popular notion of country music on its head.<sup>21</sup> While I certainly do not dispute Van Sickle's numbers, I must disagree with his conclusions. Seventy-three Number One hits—seventy-three songs out of thousands played on country music radio stations over four decades—simply do not add up to a solid definition of what country talks about. In literature, just as much is revealed in what the narrator or persona mentions as in what he or she *doesn't* mention. What is left out often speaks the loudest to

<sup>20</sup> Robert W. Van Sickle, "A World without Citizenship: On the (Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000" in *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3, July 2005, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

the trained ear. And, naturally, we must remember what holds true in much country music: that it is "best understood as an exercise in the preservation of values."<sup>22</sup> However, it is especially important to ask in this context, "Whose values?"

While it is true that, as Van Sickle writes, a great number of Number One country songs have to do with romantic relationships, how do we take the prevalence of relationship songs that speak only from the male heterosexual point of view?<sup>23</sup> A song about "a good-hearted woman / In love with a good-timin' man" was a huge hit for Merle Haggard in 1982, but country music rarely, if ever, sings about any good-timin' women.<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup><sup>26</sup> The woman who hangs out in the honky-tonk bar, while greeted and respected by patrons, is reviled if she is a blood relative of the singer.<sup>27</sup> We hear very, very little positive songwriting about a woman who enjoys a good time or a good party all the way through the 1980s, with a rare exception in Shelly West's "Jose Cuervo:"

Jose Cuervo, you are a friend of mine  
I like to drink you with a little salt and lime  
Then I kiss all the cowboys, then I shoot out the lights

<sup>22</sup> Fillingim, p. 81.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 323-325.

<sup>24</sup> Merle Haggard, "Good-Hearted Woman," n.d.

<sup>25</sup> Fillingim, p. 82.

<sup>26</sup> Beverly Keel's essay, pp. 174-176: more on what country doesn't say!

<sup>27</sup> Charles Jaret and Jacqueline Boles, "Sounds of Seduction: Alcohol in Country Music Lyrics," in *America's Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth-Century Society*, ed. Kenneth J. Bindas. Newport: Greenwood Press, 1992, pp.257, 261-262.

Then I dance on the bar, then I start up a fight...<sup>28</sup> This song, while widely played in its time on the charts, did not reach Number One, and its subject matter remained largely untouched until 2004, when Gretchen Wilson's hit songs "Redneck Woman" and "Here for the Party" attempt to reclaim the image of the rowdy female as one of escape and fun for blue-collar Americans—not of the partying woman as tramp.<sup>29</sup> We can see after taking this into consideration that at the imaginary South of country music is, in many places, a place that still leans toward the double standards for male and female behavior. Gretchen Wilson's music has been embraced by white working-class women (among many others!), but the white male response has not been quite as open and welcoming, treating these songs as more of a fun novelty than anything else.

Beverly Keel notes that "country is, was, and always will be more conservative than rock 'n roll. If rock represents the open-minded, fun-loving liberal Democrats, country is the music of the conservative, reluctant-to-change Republicans who yearn for the simplicity of days gone by."<sup>30</sup> This is true in the sense that country songs often look back to days gone by, whether in a social or intimate context. It is especially important to note, however, that it is the rare country song that explicitly tells listeners whom to vote for. Instead, the powerful medium of song tends to

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<sup>28</sup> Shelley West, "Jose Cuervo," 1982.

<sup>29</sup> Gretchen Wilson, "Redneck Woman" and "Here for the Party." *Here for the Party*, 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Beverly Keel, "Between Riot Grrrl and Quiet Girl: The New Women's Movement in Country Music," in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, eds. Kristine McCusker and Diane Pecknold. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004, p. 175.

reinforce values that are probably already held by its listeners.<sup>31</sup> This is particularly true in the ultra-patriotic country songs released after September 11. Van Sickle makes it clear to his readers that he chooses not to analyze the lyrics of these songs, which he notes are products of "a polarized...[and] increasingly ugly display of jingoism, intolerance, and even censorship."<sup>32</sup> He notes his feelings that "comment on this period of country music history must await another time" since the industry controversies since 2001 "would skew [his] findings."<sup>33</sup> While Van Sickle's hesitation to analyze something so fresh and raw is understandable, it is particularly important that we see the songs in this period for the *type* of patriotism that they convey. Even as far back as the 1980s, Charlie Daniels was releasing songs assailing the then-Soviet Union in ways that are not altogether dissimilar to how some current country artists assail both anti-war parties and terrorist groups. With 1989's "In America," Daniels sings that "this lady [America] may have stumbled, but she ain't never fell / And if the Russians don't believe that, they can all go straight to hell."<sup>34</sup> This predates post-9/11 hubris by fourteen years. Tex Sample has noted that country's concern with patriotism is one of self-preservation—one that protects "our way of life," as it were. If we look at Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)," Darryl Worley's "Have You Forgotten," and Alan Jackson's "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)" in this light, we plainly see that

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<sup>31</sup> Van Sickle, p. 313.

<sup>32</sup> Van Sickle pp. 315-316.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Charlie Daniels, "In America," 1986 (?).

Southern patriotism exists in an imaginary place that is still defending itself from “invaders” both real and perceived. In Keith’s now-famous words from his aforementioned hit song, “We’ll put a boot in your ass / It’s the American way.”<sup>35</sup> Since all of these songs contain references to bolstering the defenses against disturbance of “our way of life” and not out of concern for American ideals or for the lives of other people, we can clearly see that the patriotism of the imaginary South—and of the real South—is a self-serving one.<sup>36</sup>

A song as traditional as “Dixie” expresses the wish that the singer were “in the land of cotton / Old times there are not forgotten.” Since the song makes no mention of the hardship of life as a slave, we assume that this voice is that of a white person, and one who is fond of the “old times” down South, a time where many people (except merchants and plantation owners) lived in either poverty or a state of near-poverty.

Quite a few country songs portray a proud, defiant South standing tall against the slow but steady late 20<sup>th</sup> century erosion of traditional Southern rural life. Particularly illustrative of this theme is Hank Williams, Jr.

Discussing post-9/11 country entails, necessarily, discussing a little *pre*-9/11 country. Many *pre*-9/11 country songs wonder where the “good old days” have gone—after all, country music can often serve an attempt to preserve values, such as in the Judds’ “Grandpa (Tell Me ‘Bout the Good Old Days):”

Did families really bow their heads to pray?

Did daddies really never go away?

Grandpa, tell us ‘bout the good old days...<sup>37 38</sup>

Here we see an honest longing for “the good old days” when life *seemed* much simpler than it does in the present. The operative word here is *seemed*. We have only to look back at the copious country music songs that lament broken relationships and family bonds to see that daddies have *always* gone away in the South of the working class, whether through desertion, infidelity, alcohol abuse, or death. And while it has been observed that Americans do not spend time in church as they did two generations ago, it is in the South where this trend is slowest in taking hold.

“Grandpa” does not address much of adult life, but only reflects upon what life was like when the speaker was a child. We must remind ourselves that even with its responsibilities and care and burdens, adulthood generally brings us self-reliance and pride at “having made it this far.” Life in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries saw advances in health care and housekeeping technology that were often far beyond the reach of working people. There is no money for a new Electrolux, and even if there were, there would still be no carpets on which to use it. I have heard countless anecdotes from my grandmother, now in her 90s, and her peers telling how much work was involved in keeping a house running smoothly before the advent of the microwave oven, frozen precooked foods, instant coffee, and indoor running water. For example, my grandmother’s home did not have running water or an indoor toilet until 1969, when my father returned from his Army service in

<sup>35</sup> Toby Keith, “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American),” *Unleashed*. Dreamworks Nashville, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Sample, Chapter 4.

<sup>3737</sup> Naomi and Wynonna Judd, “Grandpa (Tell Me ‘bout the Good Old Days), 1986.

<sup>38</sup> Fillingim, p. 81



Vietnam. Upon seeing that my grandfather had finally installed plumbing, my father dryly remarked, “Maybe if I reenlist, y’all will have color TV by the time I get back.” Many recent singers (of the 1980s and later) who remember “the good old days” of fifty or sixty years ago either forget or are not familiar with how difficult it was to keep a home, communicate with family members who were far away, provide for one’s family, and not get swallowed up by financial constraints. The imaginary South here is one where things were simpler and easier in times gone by—a collective rewriting of a real and extremely hard past.

An old joke explains what happens when a country music record is played backwards: you get your wife back, you get your truck back, you get your dog back...*ad nauseam*. Aside from old chestnuts about country, we can plainly see that the imaginary South of country music is a place in which the real American South “plays backward” its realities in hopes of getting back its “good old days”—its certainty about how the world is supposed to work and its people’s place in that world. In light of this deep need in country music for escape from postmodern uncertainty, I recall a quote from a popular early 1980s pop song: “The good old days weren’t always good / [And] tomorrow ain’t as bad as it seems.”<sup>39</sup> The “land of cotton’s” fantasy world holds on to what is a fading memory for some, but that memory is nonetheless linked quite closely with its heritage and culture. As white Southern working people try to find their new (if precarious) place in the world post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, country music seeks this place as well in recalling, recycling, and even creating from scratch collective cultural memories.

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<sup>39</sup> Billy Joel, “Keepin’ the Faith,” (Joel). *An Innocent Man*, Sony, 1983.

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